

## NOTAS

### SPANISH POETRY OF THE EIGHTIES: SOME PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION

STEPHEN J. SUMMERHILL  
The Ohio State University

During the last few years, a spate of articles, interviews, and anthologies has been attempting to identify the latest tendencies in Spanish poetry after the passing of the so-called «novísimos». Early in the eighties, many of the «novísimos» published their collected works, as if tacitly recognizing that their major contribution to poetry had by then been made. Since the metapoetic «culturalismo» by which they had come to be known was never very popular anyway, it is probably true to say that this self-proclaimed attainment of historical status appeared to many as a relief. The «novísimos» were now safely ensconced in the past and one could argue that a new generation with its own orientation and characteristics had come to the fore. Betraying a perhaps premature desire simply to be rid of Gimferrer, Carnero, and their contemporaries, critics began to look for the important names and trends in the poetry of the eighties.

But the task was more easily proposed than accomplished. In his 1985 *Historia de la literatura española*, Santos Sanz Villanueva provided the names of thirty-eight poets born after 1950 who published their first works following 1975 and who therefore could be considered part of the newer directions in poetry<sup>1</sup>. Two years

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<sup>1</sup> Since we shall have an opportunity to consider certain names of contemporary poets during the course of what follows, it would be meaningless to

later, in 1987, Benjamín Prado offered forty more names that were supposedly no less representative of the latest tendencies but of which thirty were not on Sanz Villanueva's list <sup>2</sup>. In the same year, Adolfo García Ortega provided the names of thirty-eight new Spanish poets and eighteen were not in either of the previous two groupings <sup>3</sup>. This gave us eighty-six young poets specifically designated as different from the «novísimos», a total to which Juan Carlos Suñén added still more in 1988. His list of thirty-six recent Spanish poets includes twenty who are not on any of the previous three <sup>4</sup>. Thus, we have a total of approximately one hundred and six young poets who have been mentioned in print as representative of Spanish poetry in the eighties.

But these poets are writing in Spanish and it is now widely recognized that, in order to know what is being done in Spain today, one must also turn to the languages of the «autonomías». Thus, to our one hundred and six names, all of which represent Castilian and Andalusian poetry, we should add some thirty or forty more (guessing conservatively) as a way of anticipating the many Catalan, Mallorcan, Valencian, Basque, Galician and even Asturian poets who are today continuing the long tradition of peninsular lyric in languages other than Spanish. In the end, one can easily say that, since 1975, we have witnessed the arrival of about one hundred and forty new poets writing in five different languages who are not considered part of the «novísimos» generation.

To complicate matters even further, the «dispersión autonómica», as José Luis García Martín has called it <sup>5</sup>, does not mean simply a multiplicity of languages, but also a new mode of publishing poetry in Spain. In the contemporary situation, public entities such as autonomous governments, «diputaciones provinciales», and even local savings banks vie with one another to provide support for cultural activities that will lend them a certain prestige. Much poetry is now

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provide either the complete list of Sanz Villanueva or those of the other critics I mention following. See Santos Sanz Villanueva, *Historia de la literatura española; Siglo XX; Literatura actual*, Barcelona: Ariel, 1985, p. 466.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamín Prado, «Los dulces ochentas», *El Urogallo*, 12, April 1987, pp. 22-30.

<sup>3</sup> Adolfo García Ortega, «Poesía española actual», *El País/Libros*, April 6, 1987, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Juan Carlos Suñén, «La poesía española a la búsqueda de su consolidación», *El País*, May 16, 1988, p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> José Luis García Martín, *La generación de los ochenta*, Valencia: Mestral Libros, 1988, p. 10.

published by these organizations in local editions of relatively few copies with limited circulation.

This produces a number of problems. On the one hand, there is little guarantee of the quality of this poetry, but neither can we say that it is necessarily inferior, and in fact, it seems clear that significant contributions are being made in such diverse locations as Badajoz, the Canary Islands, Granada, León, Murcia, Sevilla, and Zaragoza. We therefore no longer possess the comfort of knowing that major poets must inevitably converge upon Madrid or Barcelona. At the same time, however, do booksellers in all these cities even stock items of limited circulation from throughout the península, especially when, as in the case of poetry, sales would never be strong? Thus, there is a kind of contradiction. Considering the relative ease with which almost anyone can become a published poet in Spain today, it would not be suprising if the number of young poets were much higher than a hundred and forty. On the other hand, how even begin to develop a serious understanding of a genre whose sources are so diffuse and difficult to locate?

But of course, there has long been a time-honored resource to address this dilemma, one whose importance in the present circumstance has become all more compelling. This is the anthology. Prepared by a specialist who presumably took the trouble to review all those little known poets in every corner of the country so as to select only the best, the anthology provides a short-cut to knowledge by offering highlights of significant writers while sparing us the tedium of reading less important ones. The anthology is a practical guide in what is «new and good» that helps us through an otherwise incomprehensible maze. We can even look at various anthologies to see if multiple appearances by a few poets suggest a consensus about dominant figures.

To be sure, many have warned us of the very real dangers of anthologies. These include such problems as the silencing of excellent but atypical poets in favor of others who, though perhaps inferior, are somehow viewed as more representative. The anthologist can reduce the literary scene to only a few poets and issues that he considers important, or he can use the anthology to advance his friends, or he can submit to pressures from a publisher seeking to promote a given poet. The chosen texts necessarily present no more than a fragment of a poet's work and can mislead or otherwise fail to capture significant areas of interest. In spite of all this,

however, we cannot understand recent poetry without its anthologies, which are as necessary to our experience as cultivation is to a garden. Lacking anthologies, poetry is either an overgrown forest of names within which we wander aimlessly, or it is a barren desert of unlocatable texts which take us months or years to find <sup>6</sup>.

Recently, I have read three anthologies of young Spanish poets, all published in successive years beginning in 1986: *Postnovísimos*, edited by Luis Antonio de Villena (Madrid: Visor, 1986); *Después de la modernidad, Poesía española en sus distintas lenguas literarias*, by Julia Barella (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1987); and *La generación de los ochenta*, of José Luis García Martín (Valencia: Mestral Libros, 1988). Each tries to provide a general orientation into the latest tendencies in Spanish poetry and the most important newer voices. The question is whether they accomplish this goal by permitting us to find our way among the one hundred and forty poets mentioned above. Allow me to try to answer this in stages: first, by considering the approaches of the anthologists themselves, and then by looking at a few of the poets.

Villena includes twelve poets in his volume <sup>7</sup>, Barella chooses eleven <sup>8</sup>, and García Martín fifteen <sup>9</sup>. Of these thirty-eight selections, only one poet appears in all three anthologies, the Andalusian, Felipe Benítez Reyes. Two others appear twice: Luis García Montero (Villena and García Martín), and Julio Martínez Mesanza (Barella and García Martín). There are thus thirty-four poets among the three anthologies, yet thirty-one about whom little agreement seems to exist with respect to overall importance. This may be an improvement over one hundred and forty, but it also suggests an absence of consensus about really dominant writers.

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<sup>6</sup> This problem of locating texts is compounded for those of us not living in Spain. Even when we have a good bookseller, it can be impossible to find works. It can also be disappointing to expend energy to locate a poet who then turns out to be mediocre.

<sup>7</sup> They are: Julio Llamazares, José Gutiérrez, Miguel Más, Julia Castillo, Luis García Montero, Blanca Andreu, Felipe Benítez Reyes, Illán Paesa, Angel Muñoz Petisme, Rafael Rosado, Jorge Riechmann, and Leopoldo Alas.

<sup>8</sup> Bernardo Atxaga, Felipe Benítez, Pedro Casariego, Luis Alberto de Cuenca, Abelardo Linares, Lorenzo Martín de Burgo, Julio Martínez Mesanza, Francesc Parcerisas, Lois S. Pereiro, Valentí Puig, and Jaume Vallcorba Plana.

<sup>9</sup> Jon Juaristi, Juan Manuel Bonet, Justo Navarro, Andrés Trapiello, Julio Martínez Mesanza, Juan Lamillar, Luis García Montero, Alvaro Valverde, Felipe Benítez Reyes, José Angel Cilleruelo, Carlos Marzal, Amalia Iglesias Serna, Vicente Gallego, Leopoldo Sánchez Torres, and Alvaro García.

Of course, extrinsic reasons may explain these differences. The two later volumes, for example, may have tried to avoid repeating poets already chosen in the preceding ones in order to introduce readers to lesser known writers. Then too, Barella is the only one to include non-Spanish language poetry. Five of her eleven poets write in Basque (Bernardo Atxaga), Galician (Lois S. Pereiro), and Catalan (Francesc Parcerisas, Valentí Puig, and Jaume Vallcorba Plana), thereby rendering irrelevant in these cases any question of duplication<sup>10</sup>.

Beyond this, however, each anthologist has a particular perspective that no doubt influenced the choice of which poets to include. Villena believes that recent poetry is a continuation of the «novísimos»<sup>11</sup> and to some degree manipulates his selection in order to strengthen his case. Four of his twelve poets (Illán Paesa, Rafael Rosado, Jorge Riechmann and Leopoldo Alas) had never appeared in print prior to their inclusion in his anthology, and since each reveals certain «novísimo» (or better, Villena) traits such as hedonism and the pleasure of sensuality, the volume appears artificially weighted toward reinforcing his argument. He also tends to exclude ordinary language poets such as Jon Juaristi or Pedro Casariego, both of whom appear in the other volumes. The difficulty with this is not the idea of a change or evolution in the «novísimos», which I believe is essentially correct, but its distortion of the current literary scene and its self-serving attitude toward Villena himself. The author of *La muerte únicamente* tries too hard to show the landmark status of his own generation and thereby narrows the current horizon to whatever corroborates his point of view. At the least, one wonders if personal friendships don't equally explain the make-up of his anthology.

The other two anthologists take the opposite and more convincing view that recent poetry has tended to distance itself from the metapoetic artifice of the previous decade. For Barella, poetry of the eighties moves within a more realistic acceptance of daily life:

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<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the fact that she therefore has only six selections for Spanish-language poets and only two of these (Benítez Reyes and Martínez Mesanza) appear in the other anthologies corroborates the absence of consensus being noted.

<sup>11</sup> Villena develops this position much more fully in his «Enlaces entre vanguardia y tradición (Una aproximación a la estética novísima)», *El estado de las poesías, Los Cuadernos del Norte*, Monografía 3 (Oviedo: Caja de Ahorros de Asturias, 1986), pp. 32-37.

... se advierte el dictado de una nueva actitud y estilo más en consonancia con los tiempos que corren, sin excesivas angustias, aceptando la carga del devenir y tratando de aligerar su peso con olvido, incorporando la alegría a los actos cotidianos, la sorpresa, cierta vitalidad, ironía, sarcasmo y un interés por las antiguas virtudes humanas, reencontradas en el interior del poeta, que, además, parece haber dejado de buscarse a sí mismo (p. 10).

The argument is more difficult to assess for the non-Spanish poetry because the volume does not provide enough writers from these other traditions to enable one to see them with perspective. This may be the weakest part of the Barella anthology: to propose the idea of a multilingual Spain without helping us see the unity that would justify it.

For his part, García Martín expresses strong dissatisfaction with Villena and writes *against* the notion of «continuismo». He sees recent poetry as having rejected the seventies and having turned to a more direct, experiential verse reminiscent of the fifties. Naturally, his selections tend to support this view. The above mentioned Jon Juaristi exemplifies this tendency, as do Carlos Marzal and Vicente Gallego.

It is evident, however, that both approaches, whether of Villena or of Barella and García Martín, reach the same conclusion while differing in their explanation of its origin. All three anthologies find contemporary lyric to be more direct, traditional and realistic. Villena locates the initial reaction against «venecianismo» within the very group that had cultivated it and thereby finds continuity from older to younger poets. Barella and García Martín locate the change in a rejection of the «novísimos». No one disagrees on the existence of the change itself, which appears indisputable.

Not only is there is consensus on the «realistic» tone of the period, but also on trends within it. The dominant impression seems to be one of diversity or variety. Villena comments: «No importa insistir: los *posnovísimos* se caracterizan por una gran variedad de opciones literarias (el *cajón de sastre*, también es signo posmoderno), sin que ninguna llegue a ser *estética dominante* en sentido estricto» (p. 18, italics of Villena). The editor argues for three main directions. First, there is a «classical» tendency represented by poets like José Gutiérrez, Miguel Más, Felipe Benítez Reyes, and Luis García Montero. Second, there is a «poética del

silencio», a kind of concentrated minimalism inherited from «poesía pura» and from «novísimo» poets like Jaime Siles and whose major exponent is Julia Castillo. Finally, Villena describes a catch-all category that includes elements of surrealism (Blanca Andreu), the «versículo» of St. John Perse (Julio Llamazares), a «rock sensibility» (Eduardo Haro Ibars, who is not represented in his anthology), and various combinations of these and other directions.

Barella and García Martín also see diversity while echoing a few of Villena's categories:

Los poemas siguen hoy incorporando una gran variedad de elementos estilísticos de diferentes tradiciones —en eso consiste la posmodernidad—, pero no lo hacen de manera desordenada; un cierto clasicismo y una cierta serenidad acompañan al verso, desapareciendo el irracionalismo como elemento modular en la concepción del poema (Barella, p. 9).

García Martín describes such a variety of trends that poetry becomes but the sum of a series of heterogeneous impulses. These include specific schools such as «la otra sentimentalidad» of José Gutiérrez and Luis García Montero, and also a wide variety of general characteristics such as «el pastiche y la ironía», «el neosurrealismo», «el minimalismo o conceptualismo», «la nueva épica», «la recuperación del realismo», «la poesía elegíaca y metafísica», and «simbolismo/impressionismo».

The problem with all of this is that the categories are so diffuse and vague as to be virtually meaningless. By classicism, Villena means everything from admiration for the generation of the fifties to imitation of classical antiquity, cultivation of a personal voice and the influence of such poets as himself, Colinas, or Cuenca. This is hardly more useful than his last category, which is but a grab bag designed to cover what does not fit in the others. The whole description comes down to not finding any real direction in the eighties, as Villena himself eventually admits (p. 29). The same is true for Barella and García Martín. Each trend is represented by no more than one or two poets writing in different cities of «autonomías», and within different circles of relationships. Taken together, nothing emerges except a diversity of otherwise moderately competent voices. Little seems able either to occupy a dominant place in the whole panorama or to articulate a special vision or understanding for our time.

Thus, I would also argue that another, less positive, unintentional message emerges with great consistency from all three anthologies: that poetry of the eighties has really developed no identifiable movement and is therefore essentially eclectic. Lyric has become less flamboyant and selfconscious, more realistic and straightforward; but at the same time, it has returned to traditional concerns that take a limitless variety of shapes and forms. Poetry is almost anything wants it to be, and the risk is that this diversity becomes hardly anything at all.

Is it not possible to go further than this in seeking to define the period? Are there no poets whose work could justifiably be called major? In the remaining pages, I would like to offer my own reaction to the poets represented in the anthologies I have been considering. Whereas it is obviously premature to propose so much as a full theory of the period, it does seem possible to isolate certain characteristics of at least some writers. Additionally, a few poets seem to me of sufficient quality to suggest that they may one day emerge as truly significant.

In spite of the large number of different poets presented in the three anthologies, one finds a surprisingly high degree of similarity in certain basic themes and ideas. Over and over again, for example, various poets each in their way allude to the passing of youth, the discovery of time and memory, the tedium of existence, and the pressure of a future that appears empty yet inescapable. The ways of expressing this can be quite varied and range from lucid meditations on persons or places of the past whose disappearance has left a sense of loss (Luis García Montero, Andrés Trapiello, Alvaro Valverde) to exuberant outpourings of disorientation and confusion as the poet wanders in search of something meaningful (Blanca Andreu). There is the melancholic «versículo» of Julio Llamazares as he meditates on the loss of childhood and myth:

Y, en el verano, colgábamos pendientes de cerezas  
en la oreja de la amada.

.....

Inútil es volver a los lugares olvidados y perdidos,  
a los paisajes y símbolos sin dueño.

(Villena, p. 40)

There is Carlos Marzal's search for love and sexuality as the only means to overcome the loneliness of the world:



de nuevo el mundo es un rompecabezas,  
imposible de armar con un principio,  
y sólo nos consuela un cuerpo al lado  
que solicita un último capricho.

(García Martín, 241)

The ironic self-deprecation of Pedro Casariego also expresses the disorientation of lost youth:

Tengo 25 años.  
Si te revelo  
este secreto de calendario  
es para que comprendas  
que estoy doblando una curva  
y que tú puedes estar después de la curva  
haciendo auto-stop.

(Barella, p. 59)

And examples could be multiplied from various others: José Gutiérrez, Miguel Más, Bernardo Atxaga, Lorenzo Martín del Burgo, Jaume Vallcorba Plana, Juan Manuel Bonet, Justo Navarro, Amalia Iglesias Serna and still others. Perhaps the following lines from the one poet who appears in all the antologies, Felipe Benítez Reyes, captures the depth of the feeling in its most complete form. In «Confidencias» from *Los vanos mundos* (1985), Benítez Reyes speaks about the longings and disillusion of «los jóvenes»:

Todo cansa y aburre. Las manzanas mordidas  
dejan el gusto amargo de una falsa promesa:  
su seducción se cumple y de pronto no es nada.  
Consumar un deseo es besar a la niebla.

.....

Y aunque me quede tiempo y aunque el halago equívoco  
del mundo me sujete, he muerto a las pasiones.  
Porque todo es un lento bostezo. Y no me importa  
apostar al fracaso. Como todos los jóvenes.

(Villena, p. 105)

This is the tedium of one who has realized that desire fulfilled is desire lost. It is a feeling shared by many poets of the eighties, young writers who have lived happy early years, look back in longing on what appears to them a heroic age of the past when life seemed to

offer higher causes for which to struggle, and see now that all has become the emptiness of a boring and inevitably failed future. It is the perspective of the young adult who has lost the simplicity and innocence of childhood while finding himself faced by a life of uncertainty. He is searching the past and tradition for the meaning of it all but is uncertain what that meaning is. And he is haunted by fears of not being up to the challenge of integrating it into whatever might end up being his orientation toward the future.

Thematically, such poetry explores the self in its relation to tradition. Aesthetically, it attempts to give form to feeling. On both counts, it is strikingly oriented toward *traditionalism* and really stands as a throwback to an earlier era, another version of the longing for a world that was. Perhaps this is why, in my view, so many of these poets have difficulty standing out from one another. Far from being as diverse as our anthologists would have us believe, they carry an underlying sameness in their respect and fascination for tradition. At the same time, I fail to see in any of them a really deep questioning of tradition such as posed in earlier times and places, by, for example, T. S. Eliot, Martin Heidegger or Luis Cernuda. One suspects that ultimately, these are poets who have not yet reached their maturity and who will eventually have to move more deeply into the problem of tradition in order to discover larger issues beyond the self and its longings.

This may also give us a clue to the accomplishment of the few poets who do stand out in this period. In effect, the interesting poets of the eighties seem to me those who are able to achieve a certain detachment from themselves in order to explore in a more reflective manner either this same fascination for the past or a more intellectually perceived external world that is not a mere extension of the self. Moving beyond the uncertain longings of youth, a small number of these poets are more objectively aware of the world around them while at the same time they are conscious of certain factors that complicate the poetic enterprise, factors such as language, the difference between the self and the fictional *persona* speaking in a text, and in a few cases, the problem of conventionality in the idea of tradition.

Luis García Montero might be mentioned as a good example of this, even when he remains close to the typical concerns of time, tedium and failure. Working under the obvious influence of Jaime Gil de Biedma, this young «granadino» develops a cool, terse and

detached analysis of history, the city, immediate friends, and especially his own beliefs and feelings in an ambiguous exploration of time and change:

Los automóviles llegaron un año de repente,  
y con ellos el tiempo, hacia mil novecientos  
cincuenta y ocho entonces.

.....

Yo me pregunto entonces si este rostro es mi rostro.

(García Martín, p. 166)

Another poet from Granada, Justo Navarro, also achieves a more impersonal or detached poetic voice. In addition, he offers some ambiguously open perspective on the pleasures of tedium:

Mirad un buque estanco  
en la espesura blanda del agua detenida:  
así de oscuro el tedio, bajo el influjo blanco  
de un domingo de nubes, os alarga la vida.

(García Martín, p. 113)

Even more impressive are Julia Castillo and Julio Martínez Mesanza. Both demonstrate a sense of poetic form that seems close to the «novísimos» while in no way falling into mere artifice and verbal play. Castillo has been associated with a «poetics of silence», by which seems to be meant her detached, impersonal explorations of the intensity with which unspoken phenomena of nature energize the psyche:

Un millar de pájaros  
remueven con la hazada de invisibilidad  
las frías y extranjeras  
regiones insuaves  
de la imaginación.

(Villena, p. 67)

Martínez Mesanza has written only one work, *Europa*, published in successively expanded editions. Although it is difficult to follow its process in the minimal selections of anthologies, it appears to present a meditation on history and power through a series of

rather ironic or at least morally ambiguous fictional characters captured in dramatic monologues.

Thus, though the horizon of recent Spanish poetry may seem somewhat uninspiring a few poets have produced interesting and creative work that deserves attention and that over time may emerge as truly significant. Fundamentally, one senses that the group as a whole —if indeed, it is legitimate even to think of so many poets as a group— has not yet matured or developed enough to occupy a dominant place in the era. This means that it is still too early to know what to make of them. Just as I believe it is premature to relegate the «novísimos» to history, so too it is premature to proclaim that a new generation has taken over.

To be sure, everything here presumes that, taken together, the three anthologies I have considered do indeed present a viable panorama of recent Spanish poetry. Without studying many more poets, it is impossible to know for certain, although it is also true that for all intents and purposes, it does not matter since literary canons are constituted in this anthological manner. This much at least can be said. None of the anthologies satisfies completely because one would have wished to see a selection combining the best poets from each. This is inevitable, however, and points to the problem of anthologies themselves rather than just these three. To the degree that they have revealed even four of five poets whose work we can now seek in complete editions, they have performed their task and cannot be asked to do more.